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The BYPATH

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—Found an intruder usurping his place on the fallen log.

The BYPATH

A City Pastoral

By

Thomas Grant Springer

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

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Of this little Book three hundred copies have been printed, of which this is No. 287

TO VIEW
ALWAYS

Hearst Fountain

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JUST off Life's road Love's sheltered bypath lies,
Soft lacing branches screening from surprise
Those who would stray there for a season brief
To learn the lesson of the bud and leaf
That drink the dew and sunlight from clear skies.

Is there a bloodless soul but sometime tries
To pluck Love's blossom, though a thorny prize,
And pausing on the journey seek relief
Just off Life's road?

Though sadly gazing back with tear dimmed eyes,
While Memory stirs the dead leaves with it's sighs,
And Winter with the greening plays the thief
We carry tenderly the barren sheaf
We gathered with young hands at Love's sunrise
Just off Life's road.

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IT peeped out on a main traveled walk beside the driveway, peeped shyly and seductively, like a pert face half seen between curtains that roguish hands held tantalizingly. If you accepted its half-implied challenge, it led you off on a vagrant way through the closely woven, artificial wilderness of the public park till it needed no stretch of imagination to set its goal as Arcady; but you should never follow it to the end any more than you should chase the rainbow for the pot of gold, for, should you do the latter, the sun would laugh at you long before you reached the mystic goal, and if you did the former, the sons of men would laugh at your unconciously bewildered expression when you found yourself on the main walk again. The little path was just a five minute's excursion into God's own country that you could prolong indefinitely if you loitered and lolled on the fallen log, lying in such careful carelessness just half way of the journey.

Johnny used to prolong the journey till he had made a smooth spot on the rough bark at one end of the log, but that was after he had done the rainbow chase and two loud voiced shop girls

on a Sunday airing had exploded in giggles as he emerged from the path. That was his voyage of discovery and though he returned many times, entering from either way, he always dreamed journey's ends on the fallen log and retraced his steps as he had come. He entered often and dreamed much, in fact, that was Johnny's great fault, he dreamed too much, and the great, bustling city that seemed so far away from the fallen log had so few places for dreamers that Johnny never found his. That was why his trousers were frayed at the bottom and baggy at the knees and his coat was shiny at the elbows and a rusty green across the shoulders.

Often when the city made his head whirl and the crowd elbowed him aside he fled from the mad rush, walked to the park, (for Johnny had no steady employment and very little money) and sat long hours on the fallen log. A tiny rabbit seemed to recognize him as a kindred spirit and slowly made friends. The scurrying quail used to pause near him, while the impudent city sparrows, occasionally flitting in from the busy driveway almost used to perch on him and crowd him off the log. The linnets nested in the trees above the path and sang to him. Saucy jays tilted on swinging twigs to scold him. There was more sociability on the bypath than Johnny found on

life's highway and so he grew to loiter there more and more between the odd jobs that came his way with little seeking.

Then one day he found an intruder usurping his place on the log. The noon sunflood, filtering through the wind-swayed canopy of green, touched her big hat with its shiny feather till it glistened. Her head was bent and she was tracing aimless little patterns in the dust with the toe of an absurdly small, high-heeled shoe. Her figure was slim and lithe, the soft lines suggested by the fashionable cut of her gown. Johnny stood and stared at her, astonished at such a person in such a place and fascinated by the whiteness of her slender hands clasped idly in her lap. Then something, perhaps the magnetism of his gaze, made her lift her face. It was small-featured and pale, the mouth vividly scarlet, drooping a little at the corners; a sweet young face with beautiful big eyes, too big, and old with a something Johnny did not know. As they met his he blushed, awkardly removed his hat and stood resting his weight on one foot. Then she smiled, a smile that lighted up her eyes, though one who knew more than Johnny could have seen that her lips were used to smiling when her eyes were somber. Johnny blushed more uncomfortably and shifted his weight to the other foot as he twirled

his shabby hat.

"Were you going to sit down, too?" she asked in a low voice. Johnny gulped and eyed the worn place on the edge of the log but did not answer. "There is plenty of room," she went on and a vague invitation was in her tone. Johnny lifted his eyes to hers, caught the light in them, then sat down on the extreme edge of the log. He did not put on his hat and a little, vagrant wind playfully caught the lock of hair that always fell over his eyes and lifted it. He shook it back, still unmindful of his hat, nor did the little wind seem to cool his hot face.

She turned from him and began tracing patterns in the dust again. He watched the toe of her shoe in shy fascination for a moment then looked away as she raised her head. A look of pain that yet had something of joy in it crossed her face but Johnny was looking down the path. There his eyes encountered his little friend, the rabbit, peeping out of the brush, unconcious of the intruder whose form Johnny's hid. He forgot her and began making quiet, friendly overtures. Surprised at the expression of his face she leaned forward till she saw the shy, furry creature creeping slowly to him, then drew back, realizing herself

an intruder. Johnny's hand had just touched the furry head when bunny sighted her and the cottony tuft of its tail disappeared in the brush. Johnny came back to reality and glanced shyly across the log. The big eyes were regarding him with wide amazement and he felt very uncomfortable.

"Can you make the rabbit come to you always?" the low voice asked.

Johnny nodded slowly. "Yes'm, almost," he said.

"But such a shy creature—"

"Yes'm, I—I guess they know I'm shy myself."

She watched him, blushing like a girl, noted the downcast eyes and the hat revolving in the nervous fingers and contrasted him with men she knew, men who hunted shy creatures with every sort of weapon, then thought of the trust of the timid, furry creature that crept to him so readily. A sigh rose from her bosom and became a sob in her throat but Johnny sat twirling his hat and did not look up. A moment later she asked, "Do you often come here?"

"Yes'm, almost every day when I'm not working, almost every day, lately," he added with apologetic humor, then colored deeply at

his daring and relapsed into embarrassed silence.

It had been long since she saw a man blush so readily, in fact the thought came to her that it had been long since she had seen a real man. A great desire to know what such a one was like seized her. Slowly she drew him out with a look, a word well timed and placed, till his soul like the rabbit peeped shyly out, then crept closer, closer, until he was telling her of the city and how it forced him out into the bypath, he whom the hurrying crowd on life's highroad shoved aside. He told her the quaint dreams and fancies the tiny bit of woodland brought him, of the bird's courtship and home building and how he watched the brood take their first flying lesson. He translated the rancorous chatter of the shrewish jay and laughed at the citified sparrows that flitted for a brief soujourn into the little glade like town's people rusticating but soon hurried back to the driveway. He whistled up a few timid quail that came querilously answering his call to scurry off when they found he was not alone.

The sun went down behind the trees. It flecked the top branches with a brighter gold as the shadows deepened on the path. At last she looked at her tiny watch and rose with a startled expression.

"I did not know it was so late."

"Only about four," said Johnny glancing up at the sungilded tree tops.

"Is that how you tell the time?" she asked following his glance comprehensively.

"Yes'm, mostly now," he replied with a twinkle in his eye that told where his watch had gone.

She held out her hand impulsively. "May I intrude again?" she asked with a little wistful smile.

"Why, any one can come here," said Johnny a little puzzled.

"Perhaps that is why so few do," she answered, her lips still smiling as her eyes saddened. "There are so many beautiful little bypathes that those on the highway pass by. I am going to turn in to rest now and then. Goodby."

She pressed his hand and the turn of the path hid her, then Johnny sat down on the log again and a new dream began to form dimly like the shadows that fall on a hazy afternoon.

THEREAFTER the bypath held a new attraction for Johnny, the first human attraction he had known since he came to the city. Almost every day she would come about noon and linger till the dipping sun gilded the tree tops, then leave him, nor would she allow him to accompany her to the walk. They always met and parted in the bypath to suit the humor of her whim. Johnny grew to neglect all tasks that kept him after eleven and found many jobs that could be done after four. A fellow could always pick up something on the early newspaper wagons. A quarter or a half could be made at certain places where rather dubious errands were to be run, but Johnny was not touched by the tainted life he saw. His real life, his dream life, lay in the bypath where the bright sunlight fell and the breath of the wind was pure.

And so it fell that the rabbit grew to know her and would sometimes permit her slender white fingers to stroke the soft fur between the lowering ears as it looked up at her with great human eyes and delicate twitching nostrils. She watched the

Then beautiful old age crept over Summer

brown brood of the quail take their first whirling, booming flight and they learned to pick the crumbs she scattered without hurrying off into the brush at the movement of her hand. The saucy jay ceased screaming and tried to tell her woodland gossip which Johnny translated till she laughed softly and the jay laughed too, knowing she understood. Even a striped garter snake that occasionally writhed across the path, stopping with beady eyes and swift darting tongue, ceased to frighten her as Johnny tried a hypnotic game with it.

Then beautiful old age crept over summer. The little path was hung with cloth of gold as the leaves took on their fall shades. The morning air was sharp and vigorous and the heavy dew stayed late in the shadows but the noon sun-flood was moulten gold from which the leaves stole their color. Then one day, above their heads, a leaf crumbled into brown parchment and fluttered down between them with a dry crackle. She looked at it with frightened eyes a moment, then a mist dimmed them and through the mist the old look of world-old sorrow crept, for, in that one dead leaf, she read the fate of summer and the grey, forewarning shadow of something else, for winter was coming to steal the dream of Arcady. Her

soul had learned to blossom like a pure wild flower in the bypath but now must be transplanted in the sickly hot house of the city. Reality had wakened from a dream.

Johnny saw something of this in her face. For the first time he read the sorrow in her eyes but not its age for Johnny's soul was young and his heart and mind were pure. Day by day he watched her eyes with a cold, uncomprehending dread settling about his heart. The linnets departed and at their going a silence fell upon the path. The rabbit's fur was noticeably thicker and he grew more loggy in his movements. The quail grew bolder and scurried hither and thither in little flocks. Then the cloth of gold turned russet and the wind growing stronger, plucked it to pieces bit by bit and flung it wantonly upon the path to lie sodden under feet in the heavy dew or to crackle ghostily as the sun dried it.

NE day as they sat side by side on the fallen log—for slowly through their days together the distance had lessened—the golden mist turned grey and the boisterous wind shook the shivering branches with harsh laughter and as its breath turned damp the first raindrop fell upon her cheek. She blanched with terror, her eyes, dark with shadows, widened and she sprang to her feet shivering like the naked trees the wind sported with.

"What is it?" Johnny asked, springing quickly to her side.

"Winter," she whispered in an awed voice, "winter."

"But winter passes," he said slowly, "then spring comes—"

"Yes," she cried, "but it brings new flowers. 'The rose that once has bloomed forever dies'. You don't know it like I do, you are a man and many roses may bloom for you."

"I don't know what you mean," he said slowly.

She stirred a dead leaf lying at her feet. "See," she said, "the sun's kisses and the dew's

breath drew that from the rough twig overhead. All summer long it swayed and danced with the soft wind, drunk with the sunshine, nurished by the pure dew, all summer long. Then when the sun grew langourous and the dew heavy, it blushed and blushed with joy, never realizing that its very joy was killing it, and then the sky grew grey, the wind tore at it till it was exhausted. In vain it clung, holding to its joy, till a fierce gust tore it loose and now the rain will beat it into the sodden earth never again to dance in the glad summer sunshine."

Something dawned in his face and his arms made a little movement toward her but she stepped back.

"The leaf has fallen, Johnny, the sodden ground always waited for it. The summer is over, the sunshine done, I did not know how sweet they were."

"I don't understand," he said quietly.

"Neither did I till just now. The sunshine of your presence brought out the tender leaves on a tree I thought was dead. It lived again for one golden summer,—your summer— but winter has come and I know the canker at the root. It cannot leaf again, even for you, Johnny."

She sobbed brokenly. He caught her in his

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arms and rained kisses on her face, kisses that tasted of the bitterness of her tears. Then fiercely, passionately her lips responded and she tore herself from his arms. It began to rain steadily and the wind sobbed through the trees as if in answer to her.

"Goodby, Johnny," she said, "the winter will pass and another summer come to you, for you have the soul to wait for it—mine is the tree with the canker at the root that cannot leaf again." She turned away. "No," as he made as if to follow her, "we met, let us part here on the bypath. Goodby. Johnny boy."

The turn in the path hid her, leaving Johnny standing in the rain. The wind blew through the worn places in his shabby clothes and the sodden leaves oozed under his feet, for winter had come and a dream that he but half understood had dissolved into a reality he understood still less.

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L'Envoi

WHEN smiling skies have turned to grey
And fallen leaf to sodden mold,
The rose that blossomed yesterday,
When smiling skies have turned to grey,
Though blown by windy winter may
The dying breath of summer hold,
When smiling skies have turned to grey
And fallen leaf to sodden mold.

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